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ABSTRACT

The newspaper can be used as a resource tool in the college communication course, to introduce current and relevant subject matter and to get students actively involved in the study of the content of the world outside the classroom. Methods of using newspapers as a basis for analyzing communication techniques and for applying these techniques are suggested. (Author)

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Using Newspapers in a College Communication Course

The newspaper can be used as a resource tool in the college communication course to introduce current and relevant subject matter and to get students actively involved in the study of the events of the world outside the classroom. Methods of using newspapers as a basis for covering communication techniques and for analyzing these techniques are suggested.

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Using Newspapers in a College Communication Course

Newspapers have been used as a learning resource in elementary and secondary classrooms for over twenty years. The newspaper has proven its value in most subject areas and in the adult education curriculum.[1] The American Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation (ANPA) and major newspapers work closely with education associations and with individual educators. More than 650 newspapers have some form of Newspaper in Education (NIE) programs in operation.[2] There are nearly 100 college-credit teacher workshops and hundreds of in-service training programs for teachers.[3] There is an abundance of material available on the use of newspapers in elementary and secondary education.[4] A limited amount of research has been conducted to measure the effectiveness of NIE programs, but this research does suggest their positive value.[5]

The purpose of this article is to cite advantages of using the newspaper in a college communication course and to suggest methods for its use.

Judith Hines, manager of educational services for ANPA Foundation, believes that signs point to an increased use of the newspaper in college courses. She points to the success of the 1976 presidential election project developed by the Knight-Ridder Newspapers in conjunction with ANPA. This project, designed for college government courses, uses the newspaper as a basic resource. An instructor's manual provides the guidance for implementation of the project. The basic project is:

1. Assignment. The student is assigned a state and asked to write a term paper on "the making of the President in 1976 in (state)." In this paper, he or she is to tell why the winner in that state won by relating the outcome to the issues discussed within the state. A chronology of the campaign, pointing to the decisive moments, and a comparison of the state campaign with the national campaign are part of the paper. Students may offer conclusions on why a candidate did as well as he did or how he might have done better. And, given a little bit of luck, students may select the right person as the winner. Although written in the past tense, the paper is due on election day.
2. Sources. The main source is a daily newspaper received by mail from the assigned state. Television, news magazines, and newspapers of national circulation may also be consulted.

3. Objectives. The student will gain broader knowledge of political parties, campaign methods, public opinion, and the media. He or she will also gain an appreciation of the similarities that unite the nation and the diversities that complicate its governing.[7]

A project such as this gives students experience in working with a current and primary resource. Students find the work challenging, different, and fun. According to Hines, "the project as a whole was an immense success, involving students in serious research in a way that heightened their interest both in the election and in the course. It transformed a routine assignment into a much more exciting and alive adventure."[8]

A review of the educational literature, a study of NIE materials, and personal contacts with college professors and newspaper personnel involved in NIE programs indicate that there is an unmet need for the use of newspapers as a resource in college courses. These college courses include communication as well as government courses. Communication courses transcend subject areas and offer opportunities for integrated learning. Since students are encouraged to utilize subject matter that is significant, relevant, and interesting, newspapers can both increase the value of the course and provide challenging subject matter as well. Students using subject matter chosen from newspapers will be motivated and actively involved. They can learn about communication while developing a knowledge of themselves and of their environment in a realistic sense. They can become involved in

serious research on subjects that relate to them. This may range in scope from campus issues that are presented in the campus newspapers to local, state, and national issues that are presented in the hometown press and in the larger daily papers. A stimulating classroom environment allows this inquiry into the critical problems that comprise the content of the world outside the school.[9] Newspapers can make this inquiry easier. The variety of subject matter found in newspapers is vast and there is much that can be used in a communication classroom. This array includes news, weather, sports, editorials, editorial cartoons, letters to the editor, advertisements, graphs, and charts. Communication students should be shown how newspaper reading can help in their search for speech ideas and for information.

What, then, are some methods for using newspapers in the college communication course? How can students become involved in research on subjects relating to them? How can the variety of newspaper subject matter be utilized? Instructors should think of the newspaper as offering a change of pace. It should not be used as a sole resource. It can, however, serve as a basis for an analysis of communication techniques and as a basis for student application of these techniques. A number of methods for using the newspaper will be suggested. These are designed to offer the communication teacher specific alternatives for use and implementation. First, methods will be proposed for the analysis of communication processes being used in contemporary society. Then, methods for applying

these techniques will be provided within each of three common frameworks: dyadic communication, small group communication, and public communication.[10]

Serial transmission is a process that receives much use in contemporary society. It comprises an appreciable amount of communication in chain-of-command organizations such as those in business and industry.[11] The newspaper can be used as a resource for studying this information transfer process between individuals. For example, the instructor could select a news story that is brief, simple, and clear. The class could be divided into small groups of five to six members each. All students should leave the room except one member of each group. These remaining members will then read the selected news story and relate it to a second member of their group. One at a time, group members come in and the story is relayed to them. This continues until the story reaches the last of the group members. The story is then presented in its original form by the members who initiated it. A comparison of the beginning and the concluding stories can demonstrate ways in which information is omitted or changed. Students should consider questions such as: (1) what are the implications of this exercise for communication in everyday life? (2) how do rumors or gossip items get started? (3) what particular details in the story were omitted, distorted, or invented? Why?[12] Students can see the unreliability of second-hand information. They can also see the need for listening and for perceiving skills. This activity could

be recorded and then played back for students to analyze their individual- and group-distortion problems.

Audience analysis and the problem of adaptation are other processes that students should understand. Activities for this study can also make use of the newspaper. Working in dyads, students can select from newspaper advertisements some products that they would like to purchase. The dyads can then analyze each of the selected advertisements. Appropriate questions might be: (1) what is the purpose of the advertisement? (2) what are its important symbols? (3) what social values does it express? (4) what benefits are conveyed? (5) what propaganda techniques are used? This activity can be followed by the identification of advertisements that are directed toward different types of audiences. Students could analyze these advertisements in the same manner. They could then draw conclusions that will aid in understanding audience-adaptation techniques and that will develop an awareness of values and of how values differ among people.

A variation of this activity could be based on political and editorial cartoons. These cartoons often advocate a policy based on controversial values and attitudes. The class, as a whole, could select several cartoons. Working in dyads, students could analyze these cartoons for main ideas, core values treated, and for a persuasive message. Dyads could determine their agreement or disagreement with the cartoon's message and analyze the values upon which cartoonists base their decisions. It may be that dyad members

disagree with each other. If they do, this offers an opportunity to adapt to a conflict situation within the dyad.

Editorial cartoons can also offer the opportunity for a study of forms of humor. Combined with a study of comic strips and humorous columns such as Erma Bombeck, students can form an understanding of techniques used to entertain. This might lead to the development of after-dinner speeches or other speeches designed to entertain.

The newspaper sometimes provides the text of an important speech, such as the president's address to the nation. Often, background information relating to the speech and to the occasion is provided as well. Perhaps an analysis and critique of the speech is also included. This material allows students to study, in depth, communication techniques relating to ethos, pathos, and logos.

Many of the methods for applying these contemporary communication processes are simple, straightforward, and within the grasp of all communication teachers. Working within the dyadic framework, for example, students can develop skills in interviewing. One activity that can develop students' skills in job interviews is based on Help Wanted advertisements. Working in dyads, students can select a job offering that interests them. Each dyad could then determine the most effective means of answering the advertisement. They may decide to make information-seeking phone calls, followed by in-person employment interviews. Students, thus, would acquaint themselves with available job opportunities, requirements for the types of jobs they are interested in, and helpful tips for engaging in employment-seeking interviews. Because students will face many job interviews after graduation, this activity can prove beneficial.

While working on this activity, the class may find a need to study proper phone communication. A phone company representative could be asked to demonstrate effective use of the phone in business situations. The class may want to learn more about resume preparation and about employment interviews. A member of a personnel department could be asked to conduct demonstration employment interviews with selected volunteers.

Another dyadic format may encourage the class to learn more about other types of interview techniques. For example, sales presentations often interest students. Many of them probably work as salespersons. All of them encounter salespersons on a regular basis. Using the newspaper as a reference, dyad members can select products from advertisements. The members can attempt to sell the products to each other by role playing hard-sell or soft-sell persuasive sales pitches. This activity can be further developed by engaging in on-the-spot actual sales interviews. Students could go to the used car lot, the clothing store, or wherever the product is sold, and, posing as interested customers, they could observe and analyze a salesman's approach. Activity experiences could be shared with the class. To make these activities even more beneficial, a study of salesmanship could be scheduled prior to the activities. Also, it might be possible to obtain a guest speaker who is a skilled salesman.

Within the dyadic framework, too, students can gain skills in reasoning. Each dyad could use a newspaper to select an

issue that both dyad members agree on. This may take time as they may need to discuss several issues before finding a mutually acceptable one. As soon as an agreement is reached, they should write down their opinion and three reasons for supporting it. When all the dyads have completed these tasks, the class should reconvene in a circle with dyad members sitting next to each other. Taking turns, each dyad states their agreed-upon opinion, supporting it with their best reasons. Others in the class can query or challenge the dyad, but only through the use of questions. Dyad members being questioned are the only ones who can make statements. A moderator may be needed to see that this rule is followed. After all the dyads have presented and defended their opinions, a debriefing should be held to analyze the experience. Students should consider questions such as: (1) what were the motives behind the questions asked? (2) how does it feel to be questioned under these circumstances? (3) what kinds of questions elicited the most information?[13]

The small-group framework also offers a useful format for use of the newspaper. For example, problem-solving and policy-advocating techniques are important in small groups. Role playing provides an opportunity for students to see more than one side of an issue and therefore become more capable in problem solving and policy advocating. Students exhibit the most enthusiasm when role-playing situations deal with contemporary, realistic, and relevant problems.[14] Newspapers, used as resources, can enrich a role-playing activity. In one such activity, students can assume

various roles to arrive at recommendations for alleviating a major problem. Students could select a contemporary, complex problem. After the class agrees on a subject, students can divide into small groups. Each small group could then subdivide into smaller role-playing interest segments. If students chose the problem of energy, different student subgroups could represent different interests such as a major gas company, a pipeline company, the federal government, the state government, the local government, business and trade organizations, and other pressure groups as suggested by the students. Each subgroup should follow the development of the problem in the newspaper and use this as a basis for role playing. Students should be encouraged to consult additional sources of information.

Role playing is just one way of using newspapers in small-group activities. In another activity, groups could develop a problem-solving conference or a case study around information gathered on a significant and controversial subject. Clipping from newspapers all information concerning the issue, students could follow it, research it, and discover additional resources as well.

Newspapers can be used to facilitate the teaching of public communication also. The use of problem solving and policy advocating techniques, for example, is important in this context. An activity that would offer practice in persuading others, within a public communication framework, could be developed by using

newspapers. The class could select an important news story and follow it for a week. Research could extend beyond the daily newspaper. The class could then word a proposition around the issue. After a proposition has been stated, the class could divide into three groups. One group could develop a case supporting the proposition; one group could develop a case opposing the proposition; and the third group could serve as evaluators. Within a courtroom atmosphere, the first two groups could present their arguments and refutation. The evaluators could then render a decision and explain the reasons for this decision. Evaluators could also be asked to address specific questions such as: (1) what quality of evidence was used? (2) what weaknesses were perceived in the arguments presented? (3) how might the cases presented be improved?

If the issue being studied has a local angle, a speaker involved in the issue may be asked to speak to the class and answer questions on the subject. Students may wish to obtain additional information by interviewing people in the community. Some type of survey may be helpful to support a stand taken in the argumentation of the case. This could lead to class research on survey techniques. In addition, the class, or the two opposing groups within the class, may be encouraged to write letters to the editor regarding the issue.

Letters to the editor, besides being the culminating aspect of an activity, may serve as the beginning of an activity. Each student could select a letter to the editor. A speech could then be prepared and presented that would analyze, critique, or refute

the selected letter. A variation of this activity would include role playing. Using a letter to the editor as a reference point, one student could support the letter and another could refute it. This might be developed into a debate involving other students who would determine the winner.

Activities within the public-communication framework can also focus on the development of informative skills. Students can research a subject, using the newspaper as the primary tool, and then make informative presentations to the class. The purpose of the speeches would be to convey new and significant information in a manner that the class can understand and remember. Visual aids might be required. The newspaper prints graphs, charts, and illustrations that might be adapted for oral presentations.

An adaptation of this activity could be the development of a broadcast program. Students probably have a campus radio or television studio available to them. If so, news items can be abstracted from the paper and developed into a news program. This might be expanded to cover sports and weather. Still another expansion would include commercials. Based on newspaper advertisements, students could prepare commercials to be broadcast, perhaps as a part of the news-program package. These broadcasts should be taped and played back for student critiquing.

The resources provided by the newspaper are vast. A pool of topics might be developed from the newspaper to form the basis for a series of impromptu or extemporaneous speeches. Or, each student

might take a different section of the paper, find something of interest in it, and prepare a brief speech on this.

The activities presented in this article are possibilities for use of the daily, weekly, or campus newspaper in the college communication course. No instructor is expected to use all of these activities; however, many may wish to use some of them. Instructors should keep in mind that the purpose of using newspapers as a resource is to introduce current, relevant subject matter into the course and to get students actively involved in the study of the content of the world outside the classroom. An instructor who is interested in using the newspaper in this manner should contact the local newspaper's education director. He or she may be able to provide special services to the college instructor. Group subscription rates may be available for students. Since most NIE materials are not designed for college courses, many of them may need to be adapted by the college instructor. Good teachers, being imaginative and resourceful people, will find ways to fit the newspaper into their classes once they are convinced that it will prove useful and meaningful.

Footnotes

[1] For specific information, contact Judith D. Hines, Manager Educationa l Services, American Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation, P.O. Box 17407, Dulles International Airport, Washington, D.C. 20041.

[2] Arnold B. Cheyney and Marjorie Walker, "Research Evidence for Newspaper Use in the Classroom," an unpublished paper. School of Education, University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL 33124 (1976).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Hines, ibid.

[5] Cheyney and Walker, ibid.

[6] Hines. Personal communication (1977).

[7] See "Using Newspapers in College Government Courses, an Instructors Manual," Knight-Ridder Newspapers and ANPA Foundation (1976) for a complete description of the project. This can be obtained from ANPA.

[8] Hines. Personal communication (1977).

[9] Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, Teaching as a Subversive Activity (New York: Delacorte Press, 1969). p. 47.

[10] Most of the activities presented are adapted from NIE materials developed for high school courses.

[11] Joseph A. DiVito, Communication Concepts and Processes, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1971). p. 133.

[12] Richard L. Weaver, II, Speech Communication: A Student Manual, (Columbus, Ohio: Collegiate Publishers, Inc., 1976). p. 71.

[13] Adapted from an exercise used in Dr. Richard L. Weaver's "The College Communication Class," 1977. Originator unknown.

[14] See Richard L. Weaver, II, "Teaching Communication in the Continuing Education Program," Adult Leadership, Vol. 24, No. 7 (March 1976), p. 248. For further suggestions on developing effective role-playing activities, see Richard L. Weaver, II, "Role Playing and Five Rhetorical Canons," Todays Speech, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Summer 1971), pp. 35-39.

[15] Adapted from an exercise used in Dr. Richard L. Weaver's "The College Communication Class," 1977. Originator unknown.

[16] For additional information, write to Judith D. Hines, Manager, Educational Services, ACTA Foundation, P.O. Box 17407, Dulles International Airport, Washington, D.C. 20041.